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Subject:	NC Tribune + partner news, Weeks of Dec. 22- Jan. 9
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Attachments:	Weekly Federal Recap for January 9 2026.msg

NC Tribune + partner news, Weeks of Dec. 22- Jan. 9 - Just for fun, see the Brunswick County nudist RV site expansion request. I mean, you just don't see that in WNC.....Lots of action this week in DC on federal financial aid negotiated rulemaking, but consensus was reached. Congress has less than 15 congressional workdays before the next CR expires. 2026 is here! - Christy

Congress

- A three appropriations bill package is on track for passage in the Senate, in advance of the end-of January deadline. The minibus includes Interior, Commerce-Justice-Science, and Energy and Water spending bill. See this APLU document has also been updated with an analysis of policy provisions on Facilities and Administrative (F&A) and implications for research agencies of interest to public research universities.

The full text and Joint Explanatory Statement of the three-bill package is available, along with summaries and community project funding tables for each of the bills

- No word on the two biggest spending bills yet to be completed – LHHS-education and Defense, but conference meetings are ongoing on the remaining six bills. WCU's plus up request for CET is int eh Defense budget. LHHS-education contains changes for higher education institutions.

Federal

- AHEAD committee met this week with several rulemaking sessions related to accountability regulations directed by HR. 1. The committee did eventually reach consensus on Friday. Livestream was offered and I was able to observe various key sections. My head is now filled with acronyms and uncertainty on how institutions will navigate new regulatory responsibilities related to graduates' future income analysis. Highlights:

The Department revisited existing rules meant to hold colleges accountable for tuition affordability (Financial Value Transparency and Gainful Employment regulations)

It looks like only Direct Loans will be impacted if a program fails the earnings metric. Pell Grants, for the most part, remain intact. Undergraduate certificates are projected to be the most impacted by earnings test penalties. Pell fund ineligibility is tied to program data, not school data

- US DOJ issued new guidance clarifying provisions of the Servicemembers Civil Relief Act, which require states to recognize professional licenses held by service members and their spouses when military orders require a move. The guidance and fact sheets explain the law's updated license portability rules. These rules in include health care,

teachers, and some skilled trades.

- The Education Department's new portal for colleges to report foreign gifts and contracts is live.
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State Agency

The NC **Commerce** Department announced a new round of CBDG-NR (Neighborhood Revitalization) funding. Jackson County was awarded $2.5 million to support the Webster Village Housing Project. Rich Price is the POC for updates on Webster Village.
The **NC Council of State** acted on state property matters. University-related items include UNCA demolition (buildings) NCSU demolition (buildings), NCSU land exchange (Trustees /Endowment)NC Dept. of Transportation Board acted on several local items Jackson County Transit federal matching funds ($82,500, additional funds for Jackson road modernization and bridge repair right of way projects. University related items include a Pembroke / UNCP/Lumbee Tribal headquarters street network ($2m increase to state share of the project)
State Board of Elections announced a Jan. 13th meeting to review county early vote plans that were unanimous at the county level. This meeting will contain action related to WCU's removal as an early vote site.
WNC Recovery Committee met in Rutherford County / Isothermal CC. Presentations are listed here.
State health officials are encouraging localities to bring awareness of the uptick in respiratory and other seasonal illnesses. The NC Respiratory Virus Summary Dashboard is here.

NCGA

Oversight on General Government

- Auditor Boliek reported an executive summary on lapsed agency salaries. Public comments indicate a full report with FTE specific data and agency responses is forthcoming. UNC System Universities and NC Community Colleges submitted information to OSA but will be included in a future report. Slides 8-9 illustrates 'reasons' positions were vacant for more than 6 months, which include low compensation / uncompetitive pay, slow administrative processes, funding uncertainties, funding cuts, purposefully vacant (ex. Highway Patrol)
- State Human Resources Director provided an update on S.L. 2025 -34 and WorkDay (new HR tool). Slide 8 identifies some improvements in long-known administrative roadblocks, such as E-Verify, Onboarding, and Recruitment / Hiring Steps. The presentation also provides an update on long-standing budget requests for a modern Human Capital Management system, which, to date, has been funded on an NR basis versus a recurring basis (via the mini budget). No funds have been appropriated for subscription costs past FY 25-26. Slide 12 illustrates policy changes allowed with the new legislation and Slide 12 illustrates key 2026 deadlines for a rewrite of the State Human Resources Act, rebrand of Temporary Solutions to 'JoinNC', and increased

presence in rural NC. Director Staci Meyer discussed her strategic vision to elevate public service and to deepen relationships with universities to recruit the best and brightest.

- Secretary of State Marshall presented on new dual registration for new business creations.

House Select Committee on Government Efficiency

UNC System presentation on compliance with various NCGA and BOG directives. Q&A explored 'exceptions' allowed under the new policy. *Noted that nearly all waivers to the Policy fall into Nursing, Education, Social Work, and public health, and address licensure requirements for accreditation.*

Presentation by a citizen on Civil Rights Violations in Asheville and Buncombe County. Presentation is here (*Note the following WNC entities named in the presentation – MAHEC, City of Asheville, Buncombe County, Institute of Minority Economic Development, Buncombe Justice Partners*)

Local

Commission meeting: The Airport Authority plans a grant request of $2m for terminal renovations, 2026 budget calendar updated (*Feb. 17 Budget Retreat, Burrell Building), Non-Profit Grant apps due March 31*), Vision Cashiers provided an update on *Walk Cashiers* - walkability/greenway that includes sidewalks, as there is no municipality in place to plan for and build sidewalks, *MountainTrue* organization gave an update on Jackson County statistics related to Greenway upkeep and non-native plant removal. W*CU CCESL, WCU EcoCats, WCU Wildlife Club, WCU Sarah Parsons' En. Science class all named listed as large number of volunteers and volunteer hours.* Commissioners had questions about microplastics, and *MountainTrue* talked about the awareness component that can lead to less personal usage. -Public comments included JAM staff, who discussed challenges in moving their program from the Library in Sylva to WCU School of Music (citing distance to Cullowhee and parent concerns with children at college campus) and cited a reduction in interested participants due to the concerns listed.

Partners

Golden Leaf Foundation held its board retreat this week, setting priorities for the year. A legislative delegation panel include Senator Ted Alexander (Cleveland), Rep. Kelly Hastings (Lincoln) and Rep. Paul Scott (Rutherford).

Statewide News

Berger aide leaves for lobbying firm Another of Senate leader Phil Berger's top aides is moving over to the private sector. **The Raleigh Group**, the lobbying firm led by John Hardin, says Madison Alligood has joined the firm as general counsel. **Alligood** has been a policy adviser to Berger since the spring of 2022, and since February 2024, has been his deputy general counsel. She has helped advise the Senate on health and judiciary issues. Alligood was also a law clerk to then-N.C. Appeals Court Judge **Richard Dietz**, who's now a state

Supreme Court justice. She has a bachelor's degree from NC State University and, like Berger, a law degree from Wake Forest University. The Raleigh Group's website tells potential clients that her "background as a trusted staffer in the N.C. Senate provides her with a unique and informed perspective on the policymaking process." Alligood becomes the latest former Berger aide to leave for an influential job in the private or public sector. The list includes such figures as political consultant **Jim Blaine** (the younger), Blaine's business partner Ray Martin, UNC System General Counsel **Andrew Tripp** and Hurricanes Holdings CEO **Brian Fork**. It also includes two aides to State Treasurer Brad Briner, **Amy Auth** and **Eric Naisbitt**, and two aides to State Auditor Dave Boliek, **Brent Woodcox** and **Randy Brechbiel**. Alligood's departure comes as Berger prepares for a March primary against Rockingham County Sheriff Sam Page, probably his toughest electoral challenge since he got double-bunked against another Republican senator in 2002. Hardin is among the state's successful lobbyists with his firm now representing more than 60 clients, including nonprofits and Fortune 500 clients. His teammates include Managing Partner Will Morgan and Vice President Sue Ann Swift. He and Morgan launched The Raleigh Group in early 2025, going into business for themselves after leaving the **Manning Fulton** law firm. Their clients include such firms and organizations as Bayer, Coinbase, Delta Dental, the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, Food Lion, Fujifilm, the N.C. Railroad, the Public School Forum of N.C., RTI International and The Nature Conservancy.

A newly created division charged with recommending job cuts in North Carolina agencies released a report Tuesday showing that the state has accumulated over $1 billion in lapsed salary dollars for roughly 8,800 long-term employee vacancies. The Division of Accountability, Value and Efficiency (DAVE), published its findings in an interactive online dashboard, which tracks vacancies of six months or greater as of Aug. 6, 2025.
State lawmakers created DAVE earlier this year as a subdivision within the Office of the State Auditor, an agency they have repeatedly sought to elevate since Auditor Dave Boliek flipped the position to Republican control in the 2024 election……However, the division plans to release a more comprehensive report on vacancies in January, says the auditor's press release

Higher Education News

There's more — and less — than meets the eye when it comes to State Auditor Dave Boliek's claim that there's a bit more than $1 billion in lapsed salary on the books of various state agencies associated with job vacancies. The numbers in the **dashboard** Boliek's office rolled out late in the afternoon of Dec. 30 don't include any from the UNC System. They also included unfunded positions in one key agency, the N.C. Department of Commerce, that officials keep on the books only for emergencies, and that even if filled would rely entirely on federal funding. Still, the auditor's office says its new dashboard and an upcoming report later this month are bringing "transparency to the dollars and cents behind [staff] vacancies in state government." A trio of departments — Health and Human Services ($375 million), Adult Corrections ($228.6 million) and Commerce ($226.2 million) — account for nearly 80% of the reported total of lapsed salaries. Of those, the Commerce total was particularly eye-catching

given that the department's initial, legislatively approved budget for fiscal 2024-25 authorized $642.8 million in spending and the hiring of about 181 full-time employees. The auditor's dashboard indicated that more than half the vacancies it captured in Commerce were "unfunded placeholders." Asked about this, Boliek spokesman Randy Brechbiel said such jobs "are usually federal positions which do not receive funding but are kept in [State Human Resources'] system in case they need to be hired quickly." He went on to say Commerce has "unfunded federal positions reserved for an unemployment crisis." Further explanation came directly from Commerce. Spokesman David Rhoades said 619 of the 684 vacant positions the dashboard identified are nominally in the department's Employment Security and Workforce Solutions divisions. "They are only to be filled in the event of an economic downturn when the federal funding is provided for the increase in FTEs," Rhoades said. "It has been 14 years since any of those positions have been funded by the federal government due to an economic downturn." **Employment Security** administers unemployment benefits and **Workforce Solutions** helps employers with recruiting. Both divisions are "100% federally funded," Rhoades said. The 619 positions account for $203.3 million of the $226.2 million the dashboard reported as the lapsed-salary total for Commerce. As for the UNC System, the auditor's office has "collected [its] long-term vacancy and associated lapsed salary" data but will include it in a later report, Brechbiel said. The state's universities "have greater flexibility in managing budgets and operations" than most of its agencies, he said. The UNC System's legislatively approved budget for fiscal 2024-25 allowed $6.6 billion in spending and authorized hiring the equivalent of about 36,188 full-time employees. The FTE count made the system and its campuses the largest single state government employer. Adult Corrections — the prison system — was No. 2 with about 19,518 authorized FTEs.

Duke set out to cut $364 million. Here's where it stands at the end of 2025. Amy Zhang /The Duke Chronicle Following his inauguration in January, U.S. President Donald Trump brought along a new team of advisers and a playbook for higher education. The administration unleashed a slew of demands on colleges and universities in what has been seen by higher education leaders as an "overreach" on academic freedom by the federal government. At the forefront of top political adviser Stephen Miller, Trinity '07, and Trump's agenda was mandating universities axe diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) initiatives, limit international student enrollment and decrease their reliance on federally funded research. The administration also changed student loan policies, cut Medicaid reimbursement rates and increased the tax rate universities would have to pay on their endowment. For institutions like Duke that operate both a University and a Health System, the lapses in federal funding cut key revenue streams. In response, Duke enacted a $364 million cost-cutting program, becoming one of the first universities to trim its personnel pool amid the federal funding changes and one of the institutions with the largest budgetary cuts. **[Read more here]**

The state of advising at NC community colleges: Four key findings from EdNC's survey Analisa Sorrells Archer/Education NC Community college students face a variety of obstacles that may hinder their success, stemming from demands inside and outside of the classroom. Compared to students at four-year colleges, community colleges serve a larger

proportion of students of color, first-generation students, low-income students, adult students, and first- or second-generation immigrants, who may face unique challenges on their pathway to attainment. As of 2024, North Carolina's Richmond Fed Success Rate — a community college-specific measure of institution-level student success — was 50.3%, which means roughly half of students earned a credential, transferred, or persisted in good standing four years after starting college. Academic advisers play a key role in student success. Although colleges have historically used advisers for course selection and registration, research shows that many postsecondary institutions are expanding the role of advisers to ensure students are connected to supports that help them overcome barriers to persistence and completion. **[Read more here]**

148-unit student housing project approved east of Boone *(Watauga Democrat)* Watauga County officials approved The Retreat at Boone, a 148-unit, 625-bed student housing development on 40 acres along U.S. 421, about three miles east of Boone. Developed by Landmark Properties, the project includes cottages, duplexes, and townhomes, plus amenities such as a pool, clubhouse, and dog parks.

Regional News

Opinion: Asheville's crowded City Council primary field likely indicates dissatisfaction with the status quo John Boyle/Asheville Watchdog If you didn't know better, you might think being on Asheville City Council is one fantastic, sexy job. I mean, why else would 20 people be running for three seats on that venerable board? Clearly, I jest. The job pays a whopping 19 grand a year, almost enough money to make you forget that every single decision you make is going to anger some small subset of very passionate city residents, from pickleball players to property owners near development sites. In short, you can't win, it takes up a lot of your time, the pay is paltry and you have a very good chance of losing friends through your civic service. So what does it mean that 20 aspiring masochists have signed up to claim three open seats on the council in the March primary? Could it indicate that folks are not happy with the direction the city has been heading in? Or with the slow pace of the Helene recovery? **[Read more here]**

Lawsuits linger in Russ Avenue widening: Right of way condemnations tied up in court Aarik Long/The Waynesville Mountaineer As construction continues its march up Russ Avenue in Waynesville, more than a dozen commercial property owners are still objecting to the right-of-way buyout of their property by the N.C. Department of Transportation. That's nearly one-fourth of the total 56 parcels that had at least some portion of road frontage taken for the Russ Avenue widening project. Right of way takings ranged from tiny slivers for utilities to an entire building in the case of Hardee's. Here's an overview of the numbers:

- 56 parcels had some degree of a right of way taking.
- 35 settled with the DOT and accepted the monetary offer.
- 21 contested the DOT's offer. The property is taken anyway through a condemnation, and then goes to the court system to hash out a price.
- Of those 21, at least 14 are still pending in the court system. **[Read more here]**

A town in North Carolina is returning land to the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians Graham Lee Brewer/The Associated Press An important cultural site is close to being returned to the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians after a city council in North Carolina voted unanimously Monday to return the land. The Noquisiyi Mound in Franklin, North Carolina, was part of a Cherokee mother town hundreds of years before the founding of the United States, and it is a place of deep spiritual significance to the Cherokee people. But for about 200 years it was either in the hands of private owners or the town. “When you think about the importance of not just our history but those cultural and traditional areas where we practice all the things we believe in, they should be in the hands of the tribe they belong to,” said Michell Hicks, principal chief of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians. “It’s a decision that we’re very thankful to the town of Franklin for understanding.” **[Read more here]**

Haywood outlines broadband buildout progress Cory Vaillancourt/Smoky Mountain News Haywood County Community and Economic Development Manager Hannah White used a Jan. 5 presentation to give commissioners a detailed accounting of where broadband access stands today, how far the county has come since the depths of the digital divide were exposed during the COVID-19 pandemic and what work remains before reliable high-speed internet reaches every single household tucked into the county’s ridges, hollers and remote valleys. White’s update traced broadband conditions back to August 2020, when availability was largely measured at the census-tract level, a method that often overstated coverage in rural terrain. Under that system, large swaths of Haywood appeared to be served if even a small portion of a tract had access, masking pockets where residents had no functional connection at all.Maps shown to commissioners illustrated how that approach failed to capture the actual experience of households scattered along winding mountain roads or perched far from existing infrastructure. **[Read more here]**

Nudist resort wants to expand to 69 RV sites upon Brunswick County approval Emily Sawaked/Port City Daily A campground in a Brunswick County beach town is vying for more spaces to bring in more nude travelers in 2026. Whispering Pines Nudist Resort hosts 57 recreational vehicle sites on its 35 acres but wants to add 12 more to total 69. For ease of access, the resort will create a roadway leading to the new sites, should the Brunswick County Board of Adjustment vote in favor on Jan. 8. Site plans for the new RV spaces include electricity, septic, and water connections, and each will have two 9-feet-by-18-feet off-street parking spaces. The campground currently hosts different amenities, such as laundry and shower facilities to volleyball courts and a library. There is a hot tub, pool and clubhouse, and the resort is advertised as a family-friendly space, with the resort viewing nudity as a social freedom not inherently sexual. **[Read more here]**